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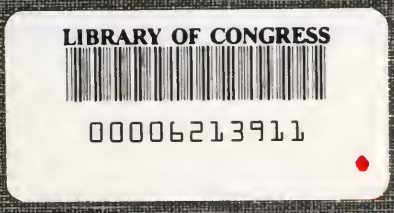

WEBSTER AS MAN AND STATESMAN.

BY

C. A. BARTOL.

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A SERMON

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SERMON.

"If a matter arise too hard for thee betwixt plea and plea, thou shalt come unto the judge." — DEUTERONOMY xvii., 8, 9.

MOST of us are tried on the spot and at the moment in our own day and generation, we having, in our bubble-like being on earth, a domestic and possibly biographic, but no historic significance, only melting into the immense sea of humanity or general mass of mankind. But there are mountainous men, rare as the peaks of the Alps or the Andes,— Moses, Socrates, Cæsar, Bonaparte,— ever standing at the bar of the human mind; and, among ringing celebrations and contradictions, the image formed of any one and all of these giants of genius and power concerns the virtue of every individual, so that I need no apology for my attempt at an estimate in the pulpit of the claim to honor and imitation of an extraordinary man of the West, one of the chief Americans, since Benjamin Franklin in the civil sphere, New England's most distinguished son, of a permanent fame whose quality it may take some ages still of reflection to decide, yet our opinion of whom has an interest for our character now, and to whom the Scripture figure of a tribunal of judgment to appeal to is appropriate on account of the diverse and opposite pleas, one against him, another in his behalf, there never having been a case in a public career in these United States of a person in which plaintiff and defendant alike more required a judge.

It is thought by some that judgment is not to be had or is an impertinence and offence on the part of us little and common people for transcendent men. Charlemagne, Peter the Great, Napoleon,— they are phenomenal, elemental, demonic, from God and Nature on an errand, in comparison with which their faults are unnoticeable trifles, they being

a law to themselves to do as they please, or as the power that hurled them like thunderbolts into the world, or uncapped them as volcanoes of the globe, may will or allow. When I criticised Goethe for his immoralities, Thackeray answered, "We cannot judge him, he is too great." But, if no single Liliput could overcome Gulliver, all the Lilliputians could and did bind him down: and, if none of us ordinary folk have the privilege of the bench for such an intellectual superior as Webster, he must abide the verdict of time and the moral sense. Nay, in the great court of the spirit, the humblest conscience may accuse him and the weakest intelligence be a witness; and, in the argument or the sentence on the facts of the record, every honest advocate will have weight in that mingled absolution and condemnation which in their inevitable imperfection the mightiest must meet.

There being then in the case of Mr. Webster the plaintiff, defendant, and judge, let me remark that, as the usual length of a whole human life has elapsed since the suit against him was brought, the passions of either party may be supposed to have grown cool, as, in many a mortal frame they once agitated, they have been laid away with his in the dust. That he was "a man without character"; that "every drop of his blood looked downward"; that he was "Samson shorn of the Philistines to grind in their mill"; and "Ichabod," a glory not only dimmed, but gone,— such rhetoric of poetry or prose, though provoked by its object's shortcomings, its authors might not care to repeat as the full tale and measure of the man's dues: and, if they should, the long annals of the land and the considerate equity of a loved and delivered nation, the mercy of God, if not the charity of his children, would convict the censors as extravagant and unjust. For this man, Webster, loved his country, if ever man did. No maligner of him ever loved her more: and, in her sore extremity, he gave us, restored to us, half-created for us, a country to love. The country, the Constitution, the Union, under his appeals, started out from the condition of abstractions, the form of generalities, the paper and ink of the

printed page, into living shape, sensitive reality, as things to love, live, or die for, that had been drowning in the flood of custom, but were resuscitated by an aboriginality of treatment in speech never surpassed on these shores.

I was in college, a boy of seventeen, when the winds first blew his name and his reply to Hayne to my eyes and ears: and I remember the inspiration that swept, as from the neighboring pine woods, through all the students' hearts and lips, there being no ambition but to declaim the choice passages from that sublimest Congressional discourse on the college boards, as I suppose they were spouted with that young zeal which no manly fervor can exceed, on the stage of every academy and embryo university throughout the North. We, the boys, scarce knew we had a country before. As the Revolutionary War, that of 1812, and, in our own day, of secession, woke from sleep or apathy the patriotic consciousness till the parallels and meridians of American latitude and longitude quivered with the feeling, so this battle, this victory, on the floor of the Senate, startled us into citizenship, made our hearts burn within us, uncovered the graves of our forefathers for a resurrection of their souls, and raked the live coals from the ashes of our own hearts. Any flaming affection may sink into cold, inanimate decay for a time. This man stirred the patriotic embers till they glowed again on all our hearths, in all our hearts. He voiced us to that splendid harmony, as an untuned or silent organ is voiced. He wrought his own temper into us like leaven; and thenceforth a child could not be born on the prairie whom the gracious ferment even in its cradle did not reach, nor a settler wield his axe in the far-off Western wilds but the stroke was an echo from the words that shook the capitol; nor any succeeding generation rid itself of the haunting memory fifty years after to this day. Perhaps that conflict, issuing as it did, nerved us for the one to ensue in thirty years. That word sharpened the federal sword. He meant it should prevent and keep it in its sheath. Unity of liberty according to law, which he promoted and cemented, made the victory possible and certain, if it did not stir the

strife. He was the only man capable for that service; and if, in that senatorial tournament, we had been unhorsed, who shall say we should, in another succeeding tilt of blood and carnage, have kept our seat? It is said that Moltke, the Prussian General who defeated Austria, won the fight with pins on the map, tracing out his military plans before he won it by river and plain with guns. And, in the encounters of the North and South, Webster for the former, Hayne and Calhoun for the latter, liberty and union were rescued, slavery and secession, had they in that their hour but known it, were foredoomed.

Nor let it be said this was but mouth-virtue and a cunning, logical farce. I have heard Mr. Webster, by a puny commentator, called a rhetorician and an actor, as in a theatre. His words were acts, and, like Luther's, "half-battles." They were hewn out of the granite of his native hills, as God hewed him out of the rock. His theatre reached from gulf to river and river to sea. The thing he said could not have been said otherwise than he said it, and his saying was the thing articulated into air, incorporated with every breeze on our banner, with reverberation never to cease in the atmosphere or in human hearing to die. He did not, you say, feel it sincerely? I answer: *He* feels anything most who feels so as to best express it and put it into everlasting form, as Webster excels and stands head and shoulders, like Saul, above his fellows, in having done. All honor to Adams and Sumner and Andrews, and a hundred of their comrades and compeers, in the final crisis more faithful, within the constitutional lines, than he. But not one of them nor all of them put together ever spake like him, or put love of country, love of liberty, or even hatred of slavery, into language so lasting and true, like an embodiment and incarnation, as this calm, continent, and continental orator did. He struck out the idea as a sculptor does a statue from the marble block. He ranks with renowned speakers of all times and lands: with Demosthenes, that doubled-up fist of Athens against Philip, and Cicero stretching Catiline on the rack, and Burke placing Warren Hastings in the pillory. If

the Greek pressed his antagonist like a boxer in a straighter line, if the Roman amplified his theme with a more sumptuous-rolling diction, and if the Englishman pierced his periods with a more pervasive, poetic, and philosophic light, till his quotable page was transparent as amber and solid as steel, not one of them better reconciled the romantic in feeling with the classic in form. In Homeric simplicity of style, Webster has in any department no American peer. He was *objective*, and had always an object, sat close to reality, never wandered and seldom sentimentalized, or, like a basket-maker, wove fancy work. We have had writers and speakers of more active, if not more vivid, imagination, taking much pains to gather and cluster their gems of imagery and allusion, till our eyes were almost put out with the glitter, and we would have been glad of some blue mental glasses to keep us from being blinded with the dazzling and elaborate display. But Webster's is, like that of the old Athenian sage, "reasoned truth," well so called by the Grecian historian, Mr. Grote. It grows, it warms, it convinces, it compels. We listened to him, says Judge Story, in the Dartmouth College case, the first hour with perfect admiration, the second with perfect astonishment, the third with perfect delight. Not often does this advocate break bounds into enthusiastic statement: at once, he is self-recalled. His fire is not in the air, but in the furnace, driving the engine-wheels. His style is like that of some great singer, Braham or Titiens, an easy and necessary and irresistible force. His argument is the pressure of fate. His eloquence, without any approach to rivalry in our time, flows like the cataract of Niagara from the level of his mind with equal and unvarying tide, because its supply is from such a broad, unfailing stretch of waters behind. Those who commonly figure on the political platform are pygmies to him: I mean not in their fidelity of intent, but in the manner and port and strain of their discourse. And I say this, not for invidious contrast, but to recommend the perusal of these masterpieces of conception and composition, left like headlands the ocean has withdrawn from. Let us study them in our homes

and seminaries and schools, among all men and all women who would, in their emancipation and new prerogatives, comprehend the nature of our government and vitally conceive the country, not as so much territory, but as our common mother, organic, living, undying, and dear to filial hearts. For this same Webster talk to his peers, neighbors, constituents, and friends, in private and in public, is, in this idea at least of a great, precious, beloved country, consistent throughout. He has wedded, welded, amalgamated the breath of his mouth with it beyond any other man, so that many of his expressions seem the great dumb Parent's own utterance, as though her rivers and plains and hills at last were animate, spoke, and found their tongue. Surely, Massachusetts opened her mouth in him, once her true representative and uncrowned king! Bunker Hill Monument on Bunker Hill will not outlast the orations that commenced and completed the granite obelisk over the martyr-blood. The vibration will never stop, of the Constitution by him expounded, and still more of the Union defended in congressional halls, unless the pillars of both Union and Constitution with those marble columns shall sink. The eulogy on Adams and Jefferson cannot be forgotten while *they* are remembered in the world: for it is, after their own deeds, their best remembrance. And, as the struggles and achievements of their eulogist were, in the same civil arena, equal to their own in importance, they will scarce be of inferior fame.

"No one man," says the Latin motto, "can do every sort of thing"; and, great as was Mr. Webster's reserved power, and though he had in him more music than he ever made, yet his big heart went so into this one purpose to preserve and unite the nation there seemed not blood enough left for that humanity which is the larger aim. He was American, not cosmopolitan. His spiritual circulation was imperfect. With all his Olympian, transcendent, and overtopping front, there was a hole in his head, so heavy we wondered how he could carry it through the street. "He was a walking cathedral," said Thomas Carlyle; but, as at Cologne until lately, the spire was left out. "No man can be as wise as

Webster looks," said Sydney Smith; yet in the end his wisdom failed. The Spartan messenger, with his news from the field of triumph, delivered his message and fell dead at the city gate. Did Mr. Webster's strength suffice only for his athletic race,—not to announce success in war, but to hinder and postpone the conflict he apprehended and foresaw, and to avoid which he was willing the rights of millions should be made the dismal and iniquitous price? I must fain with reluctant sorrow own that, as to his part in the Fugitive Slave Bill, History, sitting associate justice on the bench now for a long average period of the length of human life, gives sentence against him without appeal. I know that, as respondent in his own case, he asked with what face we could demand fidelity in the South to the tariff and revenue laws, and ourselves not obey the requisition to return those miserable wretches running to the pole-star to escape from their bonds. But I submit that the cases were not parallel. It was measuring life and liberty against a property tax: and, to use his own language in the famous Salem Knapp case, it was weighing "so many ounces of blood against so many ounces of gold." Besides, though we were shut up to the Constitution, we were not thereby bound under any oath, human or divine, to the special legislation of inference and prudence and compromise and commercial calculation which included the infamous bill. That capitulation the strictest construction did not command. In a former and worthier mood, he had told the South slavery existed a local institution by local law; but the procedure he at last consented to would have universalized it in the land. To make us, in the free latitudes, slave-catchers, was to reduce the principle of obedience to government to the moral absurd. Like Napoleon, in a different way, he attacked that moral sentiment which is a foe, as one says, "not subject to casualty"; and he went down before its sentence, as Hayne and Calhoun fell beneath his lance, when put in test for its behoof. Far away from the spirit or any binding letter in the Constitution had he roved or travelled indeed, when he ridiculed the Higher Law as

above the Blue Hills or Alleghanies or an eagle's flight. But the thunderbolt and aerolite stay not in the firmament. They descend to the ground; and safety bids us stand from under a meteoric stone when we see it come! An impious hand attracts the lightning which it defies: and Webster was killed by the conscience he provoked. He committed suicide, or something in him broke.

Yet consider his apology. He said or thought, and had persuaded himself, there was no other way to forestall disunion and civil war. "Over that precipice full of blood and darkness," he did not wish to hang. Beyond the veil of a united country, he could not bear to look. From the tremendous many-bladed surgery of civil war, as from the worst woe, he shrank. He had not — and who had? — the prophet's eye to see, after a five years' war and the sacrifice of five hundred thousand lives, a country rising from the appalling atonement of blood, — a phœnix out of ashes, a Lazarus from the sepulchre, without a bondman in all its bounds. Can he not be forgiven for recoiling from the red sea whose farther shore he could not behold?

Yet what an opportunity he had, and missed! It was as if a star fell. In his argument at the trial of Judge Prescott, he said he was willing to speak not only as a lawyer, but as a man. Would he had so spoken in his great place for four millions of men, women, and children! But his seventh of March speech was the rehearsing of a funeral oration over the grave of a nation in imagination disunited and dead, his faith even in the country not being strong enough. It was a sad, disheartened, and depressing utterance, low-toned and in that minor key which faith and courage never use. True things rather than pleasant — "*vera pro gratis*" — was his dedication of the speech to this Commonwealth. But they were pleasant to tyrants, disagreeable to republicans, true to none. His maintaining the right of petition to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia was nobler than his submitting to it in all our borders as our political doom and the "immedicable wound" of the social system, as he said by some it was

called. It must be confessed, in the morals of statesmanship he took the utilitarian ground, that we must be governed by visible or probable consequences, and that there is no absolute place in our nature to stand on and hold the fort against plain corruption, invading wrong and shame. He thought — and how many of the clerical cloth concurred in the view! — that it were better some human beings should be forced back to unpaid work in the cotton-field or rice-swamp than that the federal bond should be weakened or a State secede. Yet, if an American citizen is oppressed in Egypt, or emissaries of the Southern Confederacy seized on board a British ship, England or the United States covers him, on sea or land, with the flag; and, if they be not surrendered, will go to war against the power that would hurt a hair of their head. And wherefore? Because it is expedient or right? But pursue, persecute, seize, hale away the black! He has no friends! Has Providence a grudge against perfection in any man, that the biggest brain among us should have been so flawed that even by his own platform — to say nothing of the basis of rectitude — he cannot be sustained?

I do not join with those who charge him with consciously bad motives for his course, with throwing in his soul in Satan's game, as a bid for the Presidency, which no doubt he wanted, and should, without any auction, have had. Who does not know that not typhus, but Presidential, is the fever, worse than the Potomac malaria, in Washington? All the prominent politicians — Clay, Calhoun, Seward, Greeley — wanted to be President. Mr. Sumner, the incorruptible, to whose hands never stuck one grain of the treasury gold, it is said, wanted to be President. Was he therefore to blame? But that Mr. Webster sold himself outright for any promissory note of the presidential chair there is no proof, and with me no belief. It was said his vote was bought, too, by the cotton lords of the North. But he was no miser, was careless in collecting his dues and in paying his debts, as he understood better the legal than the moral rights of property; but, had he been avaricious, he

might have had a hoard from his profession a hundred-fold beyond all the manufacturers lent or gave. In his nature, he gravitated to the truth. "could not argue a bad cause even comparatively well," as everybody in court knew at once, in five minutes, said his associate, whether Abraham Lincoln considered his case good.

But was not Webster intemperate and profligate, incorrect in private life, "a drunkard at the helm" of the Ship of State? His works, so constant and vast, were not — never could have been — those of an habitual sot. Was he a show figure? Did he wear a blue coat with bright buttons? I saw him many times, and I remember his presence and his accent better than his costume.

It was the most impressive figure I ever did behold. People turned to look at him in the street. He had the gait of a Titan, the poise of a planet. Aught trivial, out of place, he could not abide. "May it please your Honor, I should like to know how long is the United States Court to be entertained with the buffoonery of this witness?" he inquired of the Bench, which was smiling while spectators laughed at an Irish wit. At once, on the whole company fell gravity like the grave. He is said to have looked an uncomfortable witness out of the court room, pursuing him with his eyes. An inveterate punster having annoyed him in the car, he remarked, "The smallest faculty with which it has pleased God to endow his creatures is that of letting off these little jokes." A member of the bar, who had been undermining him for remaining in Tyler's cabinet, yet pretended to be a friend, obsequiously entering his office, he turned from his desk with a glance, not very god-like, that sent the untimely and unwelcome visitor to the door; while he, Webster, quietly continued his writing, with the word "puppy," which some one happened to overhear. The conversation at a dinner-party proving to be tedious and dull, he early left the table and told his host he considered it a protracted Methodist meeting, and unless something of real concern were to be discussed it was the last time he should appear. "A Daniel come to judgment," was Justice

Story's greeting, as he entered a company in debate. If the Whig party breaks up, what is to become of me, he asked, where I was one of thousands to hear in Faneuil Hall. What a question of room for that overshadowing form, larger than the party! He was unaware of his own magnificence: and when, in a circle of which I was one, a connoisseur of eloquence reminded him of that famous passage, the close of his Plymouth action, he said, "I do not remember it," lifting his hand to his brow. George Ticknor said his head swelled almost to bursting under the battery of that address: and a lady still living tells me she sat in the blaze of his eyes, while he made to the clergy in the house his tremendous adjuration for a joint crusade against the slave-trade. But the grandeur to him was past, and he could forget it in new tasks. He would scarce have coveted even the highest office, had he known it could not "add one cubit to his stature": but, in over-craving it, his natural dimensions must crouch.

I saw Mr. Webster first in Brunswick, Me., on his way to court in Topsham across the Androscoggin. The students, of whom I was one, flocked, as to a supernatural spectacle, to watch him get out of his chaise, rub his forehead, take his horse to the stable, and shake the dust from his dress, which had, I recollect, the tawny color of his cheeks. A simple, unaffected, homespun man he seemed, without airs, absorbed in thought, scarce observing what was about him, insensibly surpassing all. I heard him afterwards in the court room, in the Representatives' Chamber yonder for certain Remonstrants, in Faneuil Hall once and again, in the Railway Chamber for Kossuth, at Bunker Hill, in the lecture room at Providence, and in private talk; and my recollection is that he could be moderate and interesting too. No man could so make a listener tremble, or kindle with easy effort and a level speech. He would not, he said, "strain himself to kill a fly." His voice was both clear and deep. There ran through the audience a shiver and a glow. His presence was influence; and, as said Edward Everett, himself a master only second in rank, "His words were always words of fire." Yet the

lines in him, if large, were well defined. He was the pyramid or parthenon, not a Gothic monster, and never will be a myth. He was English while American,—a firm-set summit with a base of flame, tropic and temperate too, the spirit come back among us of that Burke, whom, for his speeches on conciliation with and taxation of America, we must ever gratefully honor and admire, and borrowing from him to improve upon it that fine figure of the British power, which, as we are familiar with Webster's version of it, I will from the original quote: "By such management, by the operation of feeble councils, so paltry a sum as threepence in the eyes of a financier, so insignificant an article as tea in the eyes of a philosopher, have shaken the pillars of a commercial empire that circled the whole globe." Webster adds: "the morning drum-beat, keeping company with the hours and circling the earth daily with one continuous and unbroken strain of the martial airs of England." In his grain and method was magnanimity unexampled, worthy of imitation. If music may afford an illustration, modern eloquence is an organ with many stops, the *vox humana* being chief, the ancient is a cymbal or trumpet and harp.

Beyond any contemporary, Webster had, with vast compass of theme, the clarion voice, on which, however, less than with any other orator, his record in our letters depends. In his matchless words, eloquent without gesture or tone, he "still lives" and will live. Like a huge, smoky crystal is his great, if clouded, name. But what gem is perfect in clearness, color, and weight, and needs not to be cut? Even the Kohinoor has lost half its size. Can we not praise the anti-slavery virtue, without altogether blaming the politic counsels that regulated its heat? Has any of our political goodness been without spot? Had not our righteousness an alloy of self-righteousness? Were not some of our philanthropists vainglorious egoists? I have seen an end of all human perfection. Does not the moral sentiment, parting company with love, degenerate into hatred and spite? But for their jealousy, quarrelsomeness, and conceit, some of our spokesmen for freedom had been immaculate. Then there were

loud and able-bodied persons who slunk from the ordeal of battle they precipitated, and were never seen at the front. It has been said of Mr. Webster, two of whose sons died in the service,— one in Mexican, the other in our Civil War,— he halted for a time between two opinions. Was it wrong to hesitate at the dread alternative, and was it holy to be headlong? Channing hesitated, Lincoln hesitated, wanted to save the country with or without slavery, knowing that the nation only could protect black and white, and, therefore, nationality and humanity must be reconciled, go together, and become one! Was he the recreant, and was Fremont the saint? Of two possible explanations for any man's course, shall we choose the worst? If you insist that in Webster's purpose there was no patriotism, but only office-seeking, little and vile, was his sole, settled, and rooted aim, all we can say is, May the charitable consideration you deny to him never from God or man be lacking to you! Who of us will ever enter heaven, unless mercy opens the door? If any one think, as no doubt many do even now, the purchase of emancipation was too dear, I shall not agree with him, nor shall I pronounce whether, in wishing for delay and hoping for peaceful methods, he were Christian or infidel, philosopher or fool; and, if judgment without grace is to be passed on us all according to our deserts, the sufferers will not be on any one side. They will be both accusers and arraigned. Mr. Webster honestly shrank from the heroic treatment which our sick and wounded body politic required. But to his country he never meant to be false. "He loveth our nation," said the Jewish elders, respecting a pagan Roman centurion, to the author of the Christian faith. It might be inscribed on the tomb of the man in whose eloquence, as fit to our condition now as it was half a century ago, this nation is enshrined: and, for the sake of whose succor in our need, let us condone, while we deplore, his faults or defects. In his page, our nationality is enlivened, not embalmed. We may, unlike him, have been guilty of no outbreaks of passion. Are the inward chambers of our imagery pure? Is our benevolence a doctrine or a fact? It is on the register of

the old church in Franklin, as it was in the profession of all his life, that he was a Christian in belief. I should be ashamed, he said, of a Saviour I could comprehend.

So for the occasion I speak. The final judgment is yet to be rendered. The jury, divided, has not brought sentence in, and history pauses over her pen. Eulogy, apology, and charge mix and contend. Individual impressions are still in order, and every one who has had opportunity for observation may not immodestly give his own. I shall say, then, Daniel Webster was of a nature essentially noble and good. But, for a great man, in the hour of temptation, he proved in the end to be weak, with a bias of ambition that swerved him unawares; not perfidious, but the prey of his own logic, till he substituted argument for intuitive reason and right. Yet his defection was of less moment than they who indict him suppose. The controversy between liberty and slavery had gone too far to be checked; the old and new centuries clashed. The opposing thunder-clouds from North and South, civilization and barbarism must meet. Even his hand, however well put forth, could no longer have held the whirlwind back. He died disappointed, broken-hearted. In the carcass of this lion was found the honey-comb, much sweetness, and none of the venom and revenge which even conscience, enraged and outraged, sometimes contracts. Through purgatory, he has reached paradise; and perhaps some of us would rather meet him there than his sharpest assailants, upright as they felt, and not guilty of his particular sins. Harsh condemnation is loud profession. From both may we be kept!

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